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Analyzing Challenges and Opportunities of Religious Promotion in Cyberspace: Future Perspectives for Religious Preachers

Zohreh Allami[1], Mohammad Reza Rasouli[2]✉, OmidAli Masoodi[3]

1. Department of Communication Sciences, C.T.B., I.A.U., Tehran, Iran

2. Department of Communication Sciences, C.T.B., I.A.U., Tehran, Iran, moh.rasouli@iauctb.ac.ir

3. Department of Social Communication, S.U. (Int.), Soore University (International), Tehran, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify the key challenges and opportunities facing religious preachers in cyberspace and to outline future directions for enhancing their influence and engagement.

Methods: This applied, exploratory–descriptive study employed the Delphi method. The participants included 15 experts and religious preachers familiar with virtual platforms in the first round, and 11 in the second, as consensus was refined. Data were analyzed using means and standard deviations to determine the importance of components and the degree of expert agreement.

Results: Major challenges included the weakening of religious authority and user trust (M = 4.00, SD = 0.70), delayed or unscientific responses to doubts (M = 4.18, SD = 1.30), and rising skepticism toward religious foundations (M ≈ 3.45, SD ≈ 1.13). Moderate challenges involved limited two-way interaction (M ≈ 3.09, SD ≈ 0.83) and weak use of creative and multimedia formats (M = 2.82, SD = 1.11). Key opportunities included effective networking among preachers (M ≈ 4.36, SD = 0.50), enhanced scientific and communicative skills (M = 4.27, SD = 0.83), and audience-based content creation using sentiment analysis (M = 4.00, SD = 0.78).

Conclusions: Future success in digital preaching depends less on technology access and more on interaction quality, scientific engagement, and data-driven communication. Strengthening media literacy and collaboration can significantly improve the effectiveness of religious outreach in cyberspace.

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Introduction

In contemporary society, virtual space and social media platforms have emerged as the most influential and pervasive forms of mass communication, generating a paradigmatic transformation in how information is exchanged and how social interaction unfolds. With their high penetration—particularly among younger generations—these digital environments now encompass nearly all cultural phenomena and practices. Religion, as one of the most significant cultural and institutional components of human societies, has continually interacted with other social structures. As the British anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1965, p. 14) noted, no society can survive or remain stable without drawing upon the cognitive structures of science and the affective structures of religion.

Historically, religious teachings were primarily transmitted through direct, face-to-face communication, and later—following the advent of the Gutenberg galaxy and the printing industry—through written texts. In the contemporary era, however, the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the rise of cyberspace have created a multimedia environment with unique characteristics for presenting and disseminating religious knowledge. Cyberspace functions as a domain in which communication and information exchange occur through intangible, digitally mediated structures (Kahvand, 2016, p. 29), with the internet serving as its fundamental pillar. Given that the internet simultaneously embodies both "hot" and "cool" media features and enables bidirectional communication, it has transformed the traditional "one-to-many" model of media into a "many-to-many" environment in which every individual may become a media producer. This transformation has introduced both critical opportunities and significant challenges for religious institutions and, in particular, for religious preachers (mubalighs).

Under these conditions, one of the enduring debates since the earliest emergence of religion—the question of how religion ought to be presented—has resurged with renewed intensity. The concept of tabligh (religious propagation), derived from the root balagh meaning "to convey a message" (Kouhi, 2018, p. 239), and often used interchangeably with da 'wa in contemporary discourse, has undergone fundamental structural shifts in the digital age. Characteristics such as declining formal authority, borderless content creation, and the tendency toward individualized religiosity (individuation) have introduced new structural challenges. While religion comprises foundational beliefs and their corresponding rules (Tabataba'i, 1982, p. 12), and religiosity reflects the

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manifestation of religious presence in individual and social life, both are now deeply affected by the dynamics of virtual environments.

The absence of a clear understanding and prioritization of these challenges and opportunities raises the risk of ineffective strategies and the misallocation of religious promotional resources. This is especially pertinent in Iran, where recent transformations—including those accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as reduced in-person rituals and the growth of virtual pilgrimage—have significantly reshaped how users interact with, interpret, and practice religious beliefs. This study adopts an exploratory futures-studies approach to identify and develop an operational model for religious propagation in cyberspace. Through expert consensus, it aims to outline plausible and desirable futures and offer actionable recommendations for national religious and cultural institutions such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Islamic Propagation Organization, and seminary institutions.

Research Aim and Questions

Primary Aim**:** To identify plausible and desirable futures for digital religious propagation for preachers in cyberspace.

Main Research Question: What are the key challenges and opportunities of online religious propagation for preachers?

Sub-questions

1. What are the current challenges and opportunities of digital religious propagation?
2. What are the future challenges and opportunities of digital religious propagation?

Literature Review

This study lies at the intersection of three major domains: (1) futures studies, (2) sociology of cyberspace and media, and (3) religious propagation. The conceptual foundations of its core variables—cyberspace, opportunity, challenge, and religious propagation—draw upon seminal theories in media sociology and cultural studies.

Sociological Theories of Media and Culture

The emergence of new communication technologies has fundamentally transformed human interaction and cultural transmission. As culture flows through communication systems, the rise of new media infrastructures inevitably reshapes cultural values, beliefs, and behavioral systems (Castells, 2006, p. 15).

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a. Castells' Network Society and the Space of Flows: Castells argues that information technologies integrate distant points of the world into global networks, creating virtual communities that restructure material and spiritual life (Castells, 2001, p. 48). Cyberspace, characterized by its transcendence of time and place, promotes decentralized, bidirectional, and anonymous communication, enabling each user to act as a content producer. This constitutes a paradigmatic shift in both individual and collective life.

b. McLuhan's Media Galaxies and the Reconfiguration of the Senses: McLuhan conceptualizes human history as a sequence of communication epochs—oral, typographic (Gutenberg galaxy), and electronic—each recalibrating human sensory and cognitive experience (Mohsenian-Rad, 2005, p. 9). Within this framework, the evolution of religious propagation reflects the deep influence of media technologies:

- Oral age: religion transmitted through spoken word
- Typographic age: mass dissemination through printed scriptures
- Electronic age: emergence of image-based communication—posing new challenges to text-based religions
- Digital age (cyberspace): an integrated environment combining oral, textual, and visual modes, transforming propagation from a one-way, verbal act into an interactive, multimedia process

Core Concepts

Religion and Religiosity: While theology defines religion as belief in a divine creator and its corresponding commandments (Mesbah, 2000, p. 11), sociology conceptualizes religion as an organized set of values, norms, and beliefs shaping social behavior (Babaei, 1999, p. 117). In this study, religion refers specifically to the lived and practiced religiosity of Iranian society (Shirvani, 2011, pp. 34–36).

Religious Propagation: Propagation refers to conveying religious teachings with the goal of influencing attitudes and behaviors (Dehkhoda Dictionary; McQuail, 2003, p. 90). In the digital era, this function acquires new complexities due to audience autonomy and algorithmic media environments.

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Opportunity and Challenge: An opportunity denotes any actual or potential factor that generates positive impact, whereas a challenge refers to a novel, complex condition requiring significant effort or questioning established truths (BBC Dictionary).

Empirical Literature and Research Gap

Existing scholarship on digital religious propagation largely centers on diagnosing current problems or analyzing available online content. Domestic research has explored issues such as the role of cyberspace in youth religious self-expression (Jalili-Firuzi, 2006) and the limitations of traditional one-directional propagation methods in digital platforms. International research has focused more heavily on individualized online religiosity, declining clerical authority, data-driven religious content, and the use of AI for personalized religious messaging.

However, three major gaps remain:

1. **Temporal Gap (Futures-Orientation):** Most studies examine the present or past, whereas this research employs the Delphi method to forecast and delineate future trajectories.
2. **Focus Gap (Role of the preacher):** Prior work often discusses media or religiosity broadly; few studies systematically analyze the unique role, capabilities, and uncertainties facing preachers in cyberspace.
3. **Uncertainty-Driven Modeling:** By identifying key uncertainties, this study provides a foundation for scenario-based strategic planning—going beyond descriptive analyses of opportunities and challenges.

Material and Methods

The present study, aimed at examining the future opportunities and challenges of religious propagation for missionaries in cyberspace, required identifying and building consensus among experts' opinions under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty. Accordingly, the research methodology was grounded in a qualitative–exploratory approach and employed specialized futures studies techniques.

In terms of purpose, the study is applied, and in terms of nature, it is exploratory–descriptive. The exploratory nature of the research was essential due to its focus on emerging trends and on constructing a future for which adequate quantitative data does not yet exist.

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From a methodological perspective, this research adopts a qualitative approach, as its aim was to construct a model and achieve an in-depth understanding of experts' perceptions rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. The primary data-collection technique used was the Modified Delphi Technique, a structured method that facilitates theoretical convergence among specialists.

The Delphi method is a structured group communication process that enables experts to engage in decision-making and analysis under uncertainty with minimal error (Linstone & Turoff, 1975, p. 4).

Given the expert-oriented nature of the research, an experts panel was used instead of a statistical population. The panel included university professors and practitioners with academic and practical experience in two domains relevant to the study: (1) religion and religious propagation, and (2) cyberspace, the internet, and communication technologies. A non-probability purposive sampling strategy was applied. This method is based on the assumption that the success of Delphi research depends on the knowledge and depth of the participants' insights rather than on statistical representativeness (Babbie, 2004, p. 45). Experts were selected from faculty members in the fields of religion and media at recognized universities and research institutes in Tehran (e.g., Imam Sadiq University, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Shahid Beheshti University) and in Qom (Baqir al-Uloom Institute).

In the first Delphi round, 15 experts participated; due to attrition, this number decreased to 11 in the second (final) round. This figure falls within the standard range for Delphi panels (15–35 members) and allows for the inclusion of complementary and even contrasting perspectives (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963, pp. 458–467).

Instrument

The primary data-collection tool was a researcher-developed Delphi questionnaire administered in several successive rounds, either electronically or in person. Initially, through library research, documents, and reports, key factors, opportunities, and challenges were identified. Based on these studies, the initial questions and items were structured prior to the Delphi process.

Questionnaire Structure

- The main instrument was the Delphi questionnaire, completed in two consecutive rounds in a non-face-to-face electronic format.

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- Unlike the classical Delphi method, the first-round questionnaire was structured and multiple-choice rather than fully open-ended.
- To preserve the exploratory nature of the study and to capture emerging expert perspectives—a key strength of the Delphi method—each section included an open-ended "Other item" or "Additional comments" field, enabling experts to propose new key factors and uncertainties.

Feedback and Iteration

The Delphi process was conducted based on anonymity, iteration, and controlled feedback. Statistical summaries from Round 1 were provided to participants as feedback, enabling them to revise their judgments in Round 2 and move toward consensus.

Data Analysis

After collecting experts' responses in each round, data were analyzed using Excel. The steps included:

1. **Data entry and coding:** Experts' responses were entered into Excel tables, with each question coded and numerical values assigned to the responses.
2. **Calculation of central tendency and dispersion:** Means and standard deviations were computed. Higher means indicated more positive evaluations, while lower standard deviations indicated greater agreement among experts.
3. **Item retention or elimination:**
   - Items with a mean above 2.5 but high standard deviation (indicating substantial disagreement) were removed.
   - Items with means below or close to 2.5 and acceptable standard deviations were retained due to their importance and relative consensus.
4. **Delphi rounds:** After analyzing Round 1 data, the questionnaire was revised and redistributed for Round 2 to achieve final consensus.
5. **Ranking predictions:** Items retained for Round 2 were ranked based on their means and standard deviations to identify the most important and reliable predictions for reporting.

Validity and Reliability

Before Round 1, the Delphi questionnaire was reviewed by a pilot group of specialists to ensure clarity and adequate content coverage. Necessary revisions were made to refine wording and

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maintain a single conceptual focus for each item. Construct validity in the Delphi method is strengthened through repeated rounds and increased convergence of expert opinions. The existence and analysis of contrasting viewpoints in each round further enhanced the credibility of findings. Reliability in Delphi research arises primarily from process control and expert selection rather than traditional statistical measures (Alizadeh, 2006, p. 39). Nevertheless, two mechanisms were used to enhance statistical reliability:

1. **Controlled feedback:** Presenting group means and standard deviations from prior rounds enabled rational revision of opinions and reduced dispersion.
2. **Use of statistical indicators:** Although they do not directly measure internal reliability, statistical indicators were used to assess consensus.

Criteria for Consensus

Data from the Delphi process were analyzed using descriptive statistics:

Measures of central tendency: Mean and median were used to determine average expert ratings.

Measure of dispersion: Standard deviation assessed variability in Likert-scale responses.

Disagreement in Round 1

Lack of consensus in Round 1 was confirmed by high standard deviations across most items, consistent with Delphi methodology: larger SD values indicate lower agreement (Williams & Webb, 1994, pp. 180–186). This necessitated a second round to reduce variance and approach the consensus threshold.

Final Consensus and Ranking

Final consensus and item ranking in Round 2 were achieved through significant reductions in standard deviation and stabilization of means and medians.

Criterion	Statistical Indicator	Consensus Threshold	Purpose
Central tendency	Mean rank ($\bar{X}$)	≤ 2.25	Items below this threshold were considered consensus-based.
Dispersion	Standard deviation (SD)	≤ 1.0	Items meeting this criterion reflected acceptable agreement.

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Analysis of Delphi Round 1

In the first Delphi round, the perspectives of 15 religious missionaries regarding the challenges and opportunities of religious propagation in cyberspace were collected and analyzed. The aim was to identify factors influencing the effectiveness of digital religious outreach and to prioritize them. Qualitative analysis showed that despite their concerns about online threats and risks, missionaries regard cyberspace as an unavoidable arena for engaging with younger generations.

Key Challenges Identified

Major challenges highlighted by the participants included:

- Insufficient media literacy and unfamiliarity with content-creation skills, reducing the visibility of religious messages compared with entertainment-oriented content.
- Increasing prevalence of religious misconceptions and distortions.
- Superficiality and commercialization of religious dissemination.
- Declining authority of traditional clerical institutions and the rise of non-experts in religious discourse online.
- Ethical and behavioral challenges among users, including disrespectful speech and ridicule of religious values.

Key Opportunities Identified

Participants also pointed to several potential opportunities that, if properly managed, could strengthen religious outreach:

- Broad and direct access to large audiences.
- Possibility of producing diverse and engaging content using multimedia tools.
- Improved understanding of audiences' real needs through user feedback.
- Enhanced interaction and two-way communication with followers.
- Emergence of new forms of religious authority through sustained activity on social media.

Overall, round 1 result revealed a dual perception among missionaries: cyberspace is simultaneously a highly challenging and highly promising environment. Continued success in digital religious propagation requires improved media literacy, strengthened communication skills, and attention to the actual needs of audiences. Based on these results, the most important factors—media literacy, addressing misconceptions, interactive communication, creative content

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production, and preservation of religious authority—were selected for Round 2 to achieve final expert consensus.

Content Analysis (Delphi Round 2)

For Round 2 analysis, means and standard deviations were again calculated. The mean indicates the typical value of responses, while the standard deviation reflects the degree of variability around that mean. This allowed examination not only of central tendencies but also of fluctuations and consistency across expert ratings.

Results

Challenges

Findings from the second round of the Delphi process indicate that certain challenges carry higher levels of importance and consensus among the experts.

"Lack of media literacy" received a mean score of 3.09 with a standard deviation of 1.32, reflecting a moderate level of importance. Although the intensity of concern slightly decreased compared to the first round, it remains a notable challenge in the domain of digital religious propagation.

"Weakening of religious authority and declining user trust" emerged as one of the most significant challenges, with a mean of 4.00 and a standard deviation of 0.70, indicating a high degree of agreement among the panelists. Likewise, *"Failure to provide timely and scholarly responses to religious doubts"* (mean = 4.18, SD = 1.30) was identified as a key barrier to effective religious outreach in cyberspace.

"Increase in doubts and misconceptions about religious foundations" received an approximate mean of 3.45 and a standard deviation of 1.13. This reflects moderate concern but also indicates variability in experts' views regarding the severity and extent of this challenge.

For the item *"Lack of two-way interaction with the audience"*, a mean of 3.09 and a standard deviation of 0.83 were obtained, suggesting moderate importance coupled with relatively satisfactory consensus among experts.

Finally, *"Weakness in using creative and multimedia formats"* yielded a mean of 2.82 and a standard deviation of 1.11, signifying that while some experts view it as an important challenge, there is considerable divergence of opinion on its significance.

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Opportunities

In the opportunities dimension, *"Mastering the algorithms and mechanisms of social media platforms"* (mean = 3.91, SD = 1.14) emerged as a key priority, evolving from an initial concern into a strategic opportunity.

"Enhancing the scientific, technical, and communication competencies of missionaries" achieved the highest level of consensus, with a mean of 4.27 and a standard deviation of 0.83, and was identified as a fundamental requirement for successful digital religious propagation.

"Audience sentiment analysis and tailored content production" (mean = 4.00, SD = 0.78) received strong expert endorsement, underscoring the importance of understanding the emotional and cognitive needs of audiences for effective religious outreach.

"Effective networking among missionaries" demonstrated the highest consensus across all items, with a mean of 4.36 and a standard deviation of 0.50, reflecting shared recognition of the necessity for synergy, coordination, and experience exchange among religious communicators.

"Producing content tailored to users' tools and age groups" (mean = 3.91, SD = 0.70) was identified as another strategic opportunity, emphasizing the importance of aligning content formats and language with the characteristics of different generational cohorts.

Finally, *"The dominance of short and multimedia content (reels, stories, etc.)"* (mean = 3.82, SD = 1.08) and *"The growing presence of short-form video advertisements"* (mean = 3.09, SD = 1.44) indicate that, although short-form content represents a valuable opportunity for audience engagement, expert opinions remain divided regarding its broader implications.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the most critical challenges in digital religious communication are the decline in user trust toward traditional religious authorities and the insufficiently rapid and scholarly response to emerging doubts. This aligns with previous studies, which similarly identify these factors as key contributors to the diminished effectiveness of religious discourse in online environments. The mean scores and standard deviations further reveal that, within the domain of challenges, expert opinions exhibit relatively higher dispersion compared to the opportunity's domain—an observation that reflects the multifaceted and complex nature of obstacles facing

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religious propagation in digital contexts. Conversely, in the domain of opportunities and needs, the level of consensus among experts is markedly higher. This consensus highlights the centrality of media education, audience analysis, and professional networking as shared and actionable pathways for enhancing the performance of religious preachers in cyberspace.

These results are consistent with existing literature on *religious media literacy* and the *effectiveness of digital communication*, emphasizing that communicative competence and an understanding of user behavior in online settings play a more decisive role in determining the success of religious propagation than content alone. Skills related to interaction, empathy, and real-time engagement appear to be essential for gaining credibility and maintaining influence within digital religious ecosystems.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and focused on a specific group of religious and media experts, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, a lack of complete data for some items in the first Delphi round influenced the calculation of certain indicators. Finally, there is the possibility of response bias, as participants' familiarity with or personal experience in digital religious outreach may have shaped their evaluations.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

From a practical perspective, the results can guide religious and educational institutions in designing training programs aimed at updating and enhancing the media competencies of religious preachers. The findings underscore the necessity of equipping practitioners with the analytical, technical, and communicative skills required to operate effectively across rapidly evolving digital platforms. From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital religious propagation by clarifying the role of audience sentiment analysis, user-centered communication, and algorithm-informed strategies. The results also provide direction for future research, particularly in the areas of algorithmic engagement and data-driven approaches to understanding audience behavior.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings suggest that the primary challenges in digital religious propagation include declining user trust, slow responses to religious doubts, and insufficient two-way interaction

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between preachers and audiences. In contrast, the key opportunities lie in mastering platform algorithms, enhancing the competencies of religious preachers, and producing content tailored to audience needs. The relatively low standard deviation observed for certain items—such as networking among preachers—indicates a high level of consensus and underscores the strategic importance of these factors. Conversely, items associated with higher variability in expert responses require deeper analysis and revision within educational and outreach strategies.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

- Designing and implementing comprehensive media literacy programs for religious preachers.
- Establishing structured interactive systems to facilitate continuous engagement with audiences.
- Investing in the production of multimedia and analytical content tailored to different age groups.
- Conducting future research with larger samples and employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to enhance the robustness and precision of the findings.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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